



# Display

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## **Display**

Ivan Gaskell

The display of religious objects takes many forms. While sculpture on the exterior of religious buildings is visible for the long term, relics, cult images, and masquerades are shown only occasionally. One way of emphasizing the potency of an object is to reveal it infrequently. In many religious systems display is restricted, for some things are dangerous to inappropriate viewers, while others are too powerful to be seen by anyone. When access is possible, viewers value intimate encounter, usually drawing as close as possible to sacred objects. Some are small enough to be worn as amulets close to the body. On ceremonial occasions, such as processions or masquerades, devotees may compete for the privilege of carrying sacred objects. Access is usually hierarchically privileged or controlled. Those with hieratic functions—priests, elders, shamans, vow-makers, museum curators—usually enjoy the most intimate access to sacred materials, whether displayed or concealed. Priests often have exclusive access to parts of a sacred structure containing numinous materials, and museum donors pay for the privilege of exhibition tours with curators during closed hours. Intimacy of access signals status, and display reinforces social distinctions and hierarchies. However, to reduce the display of sacred material to this function alone would be misleading. The three case studies that

follow—all set in Trafalgar Square, London—illustrate the variety of associations that sacred objects can have, even when displayed within yards of each other.

Founded in 1824, the National Gallery opened in its current building on Trafalgar Square in 1838. Its collection has always included devotional paintings made for European Catholic churches. Such works lose their originally intended sacred status when removed from places of worship. Among them is a painting by the Netherlandish artist Gerard David (ca. 1460-1523) acquired in 1878. *Canon Bernardijn Salviati and Three Saints* is a rectangular panel (40  $\frac{3}{4}$  x 37  $\frac{1}{8}$  inches) cut down at the top. Lorne Campbell has shown that this panel and a *Crucifixion* in the Staatliche Museen, Berlin by the same artist (which retains its semicircular upper part) together originally formed a hinged diptych, the London panel on the left, the Berlin panel on the right (Campbell 122-133 [NG 1045]). When open, the landscape and figures would have formed a unified field in which the canon's upward gaze meets that of the crucified Christ.

The London panel is in Room 5, devoted to Netherlandish paintings made between about 1480 and 1525, including works by Quinten Massys, Hieronymus Bosch, and others by Gerard David. All but one are of religious subjects. Their presentation, as befits an art museum, is secular, emphasizing their aesthetic qualities and their place in art history. *Salviati* hangs on the wall as an independent work, like any other painting. Its current use is quite different from when it was first made.

In 1501, *Salviati*, a canon of the collegiate church of St. Donatian, Bruges, obtained permission to repair its altar of St. John the Baptist, squeezed into a corner of the nave against the choir screen. His mother had been buried beside this altar in 1494, and *Salviati* arranged for his own interment there (he died in 1519). As Hugo van de

Velden has demonstrated, Gerard David's diptych altarpiece was designed to fit into this constricted space.<sup>1</sup> Its right wing (Berlin) was affixed to the northern end of the choir screen. Its left wing (London) would have opened to not much more than a right angle, constrained by the wall on the left perpendicular to the choir screen. The diptych would usually have been closed, presenting the reverse of the London panel. This is now severely damaged, but fragments remain of a painted window with shutters open towards the viewer revealing the Resurrected Christ. Not surprisingly, the ruined reverse of the painting is not displayed in the National Gallery. Once, however, it would have been the most frequently visible part of the entire painting.

The display of the panel in the National Gallery cannot convey the extraordinary sophistication of the original display of the diptych in the church. There, it would have activated the viewer's space in two modes successively. The first, when closed, was a trompe l'oeil illusion of real shutters open towards the viewer to reveal the Resurrected Christ, as though in a vision. The second, when open, implied an elastic spatial envelopment of the viewer, uniting the likeness of Salviati not only with the crucified Christ through their exchange of gazes, but also with the celebrant at the altar over whose shoulder Salviati seems to be peering. Represented space on two adjoining planes combined with liturgical celebration to secure the abridgement of Salviati's time in Purgatory. The display in the National Gallery, however, presents viewers with a secularized object to be understood aesthetically and art historically by comparison with other examples of Netherlandish painting. Given that only part of the original object is available, the National Gallery could scarcely display what remains in such a way as to evoke its original visual and theological complexity. Yet acknowledging that the

dominant ideal of the institution is one of secular aesthetic worth, its display serves this function perfectly well.

Those exiting the National Gallery into Trafalgar Square on the afternoon of Sunday, June 28, 2009 encountered a quite different display of religious artifacts: a temporary public ritual. Three huge, brightly painted wooden carriages, each surmounted by a tall fabric canopy, were parked in a row in front of the National Gallery. The many people gathered around them were exchanging Indian sweetmeats, and receiving fruit from those high up on the carriage platforms. This was the London manifestation of Rath Yatra, the Chariot Festival, celebrating the journey by Sri Jagannatha, a form of Krishna (one of the avatars of Vishnu), and his two siblings, Sri Balarama, and Srimate Subhadra Devi, from the temple at Puri on the Bay of Bengal to their summer temple. Various stories are associated with the festival, all asserting the powers of Krishna.

The festival no longer takes place only in India, but also in an ever-increasing number of Western cities. These are the biggest annual occasions organized by branches of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON, also known as the Hare Krishna Movement), founded in 1966. The festival is the major annual outreach effort by ISKCON. Its Bengali founder, Abhay Charanaravinda Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada (1896-1977), taught the Gaudiya Vaishnava tradition of Hinduism, and was conspicuously successful in proselytizing in the West during the late 1960s and early 1970s. The adherence of his teachings to Hindu tradition has helped to insure the continuing success and acceptance of his movement in the larger Hindu world and beyond. Gaudiya Vaishnavism is based primarily on the scriptures of the *Bhagavad Gita* and *Bhagavata Purana*. Since the fifteenth century, its teachers have stressed devotion to

Vishnu and his incarnations (including Krishna) as the supreme manifestations of a single deity.

The instructions on the ISKCON website to those attending make explicit the centrality to the festival of the display of the images of the three deities:

Please try and get to the start of the procession before the Deities of Sri Jagannatha, Srimate Subhadra, and Sri Balarama arrive. The Deities are the centre piece of the event and by making sure you are there to welcome Them when They arrive in Their limousines, accompanied by Srila Prabhupada and Their pujaris, you will surely please Their merciful Lordships. The Deities come out of the temple to freely distribute Their loving glances to anyone and everyone.

Wherever the Lord appears He is accompanied by His beloved devotees and friends. If you are also there then you will surely benefit.<sup>2</sup>

Devotees hauled the heavy chariots, each containing its designated image, from their starting point near Hyde Park Corner, along Piccadilly and Haymarket to Trafalgar Square, followed by many others singing, chanting, and playing instruments. Once there, the chariots were arranged in front of the National Gallery for the further display of the images, while devotional performances by dancers and musicians took place on a temporary stage before the chariots, directly beneath Nelson's Column, the monument that dominates the square. To one side of the stage, an aged holy man in pale saffron robes was seated beneath a parasol, cross legged and immobile. His display of impassivity seemed to render him the living counterpart of the images in the chariots.

While many attended for devotional reasons, others were surely no more than curious, or attracted by the conviviality of the event. William Railton, who was responsible for the monument to Britain's great naval hero in the early 1840s, is unlikely to have foreseen a Hindu rite occurring in its shadow. It would also likely have surprised Sir Frederick Burton, who, as director, acquired many religious paintings for the National Gallery, including, in 1878, Gerard David's *Canon Bernardijn Salviati and Three Saints*. However, secular display did not entirely dominate Trafalgar Square in Railton and Burton's days. The neighbor of the National Gallery on the north-east side of Trafalgar Square was then and remains the Anglican church of St. Martin-in-the-Fields.

The present church, consecrated in 1726, is the most influential building designed by James Gibbs (1682–1754). An expansion and radical refurbishment to remove nineteenth-century accretions took place between 2006 and 2008. The most prominent new internal feature furnishes a third example of the contemporary display of religious artifacts in Trafalgar Square: the new east window. The Victorian glass in this Palladian window was destroyed during an air raid in 1940, and replaced temporarily. Twenty-five artists were invited to submit proposals, the brief stating that their solutions should “embody light ... and above all encourage reflection and contemplation.” A panel, which included the vicar and the director of the National Gallery, drew up a shortlist of five proposals. These were displayed at the church in the spring of 2006. The panel chose the proposal by Shirazeh Houshiary, working in collaboration with her architect husband Pip Horne.

The Iranian-born Houshiary, who has lived in London since 1974, works in a variety of media, and is known for the asceticism of her art. Although inspired by her

study of Sufism, Houshiary purposefully refuses to orient her work in either an obviously Western or Islamic idiom. She is quoted as saying, “I set out to capture my breath, to find the essence of my own experience, transcending name, nationality, cultures.” Her window for St. Martin-in-the-Fields was unveiled in April, 2008. It is a field of irregularly spaced, vertical and horizontal steel comes supporting subtly etched plain glass panes. At its center is an oval pane set diagonally, like a crystal lens caught in a net causing the filaments to dilate to form a rippling cross. While the cross has obvious connotations, the oblique central pane focuses the viewer’s attention on light itself. The confessional association of the cross gives way to a culturally far less specific emphasis on the numinous quality of light. The window prompts viewers whose terms of reference and symbolic needs vary to find their own particular concerns represented, whether overtly Christian, more generally spiritual, or purely aesthetic. Houshiary has succeeded in that most difficult of tasks in a multicultural society: the display of a religious work in a religious context that can engage a wide range of interests uncompromisingly and unequivocally.

In one place on earth, within a few yards of each other, I found displays of religious artifacts presented in a wide variety of ways: secular, aesthetic, long-term, occasional, performative, ritual, participatory, mystical. Gerard David’s painting, the chariots of the Hindu deities, and Shirazeh Houshiary’s window, all have complex religious connotations and uses, past or current. All function through display. These displays may contribute to the generation and reinforcement of social distinctions and hierarchies, yet they do much more. Those who contrive displays do so with a purpose, yet such displays do not shape merely passive viewers; rather, they elicit response.



Response can range from devotion to iconoclasm—never forgetting indifference—and is neither uniform nor predictable. In Trafalgar Square, like elsewhere in the world, viewers make decisions whether to embrace, acquiesce in, ignore, or subvert what is displayed to them. The choice is theirs.

#### Works Cited

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<sup>1</sup> Van de Velden 133-139. First noted in the sacristy of the cathedral church of St. Donatian in Bruges in or shortly after 1777, the painting was taken to England in 1792. The church was demolished in 1799-1800.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.rathayatra.co.uk/london> (accessed December 15, 2009).